

## Photography, care and the visual economy of Gambian transatlantic kinship relations

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## **Abstract**

This article examines transnational kinship relations between Gambian parents in the United Kingdom and their children and carers in The Gambia, with a focus on the production, exchange and reception of photographs. Many Gambian migrant parents in the U.K. take their children to The Gambia to be cared for by extended family members. Mirroring the mobility of Gambian migrants and their children, as they travel between the U.K. and The Gambia, photographs document changing family structures and relations. It is argued that domestic photography provides insight into the representational politics, values and aesthetics of Gambian transatlantic kinship relations. Further, the concept of the moral economy supports a hermeneutics of Gambian family photographic practice and develops our understanding of the visual economy of transnational kinship relations in a number of ways: it draws attention to the way in which the value attributed to a photograph is rooted in *shared* moral and cultural codes of care within transnational relations of inequality and power; it helps us to interpret Gambian's responses to and treatment of family photographs; and it highlights the importance attributed to portrait photography and the staging, setting and aesthetics of photographic content within a Gambian imaginary.

Disturbing accounts of overcrowded vessels carrying migrants across the Mediterranean, drownings and washed up bodies on Southern European shores highlight the risks that some migrants, many of whom are West African, are prepared to take in the pursuit of better lives in Europe. Yet, most West African migrants do not resort to such extremes and travel to the Europe on study and tourist visas (De Haas, 2008: 1309). However, in both cases the state and media represent migrants as an overwhelming mass and a tidal wave of people, with little regard for individual biographies, personal narratives, relationships and intimate histories. Paradoxically, it is when the state regulates migrants' mobility - as well as verifies, revokes and / or questions their identity and status - that their biographies and family histories

become the object of its gaze. In attempts to capture these personal narratives and histories, as well as a sense of migrants' experiences of transnational care and intimacy, this article examines transnational kinship relations between Gambian parents in the United Kingdom and their children and carers in The Gambia, with a focus on the production, exchange and reception of photographs.

Developments in visual and media technologies have changed the way we produce, acquire, remember, experience, and engage with photographic images (Vivienne and Burgess, 2015:18). Further, the rapid expansion of communication technologies from the early 1990s has supported long distance communication and connection between migrants and their families. As a result, they can communicate with greater ease, speed, intensity and regularity (Carling et al., 2012: 203), thereby facilitating relations of care. Many migrants are able to move between a variety of media, making use of different types depending in part on the level of intimacy or distance they want to establish (Madianou and Miller 2012, 8). However, I focus my analysis on photographs, both digital and analogue because the movement of photographs, as accessible everyday objects, provides a map on which to locate the networks and social relations that are central to migrants' lives and transnational relations of care. It is argued that domestic photography provides insight into the 'representational politics' (Poole, 1997:5-6), values and aesthetics of Gambian transatlantic kinship relations. Further, it is essential to the (re) production of transnational relations of care and the moral economy.

Gambians migrate to Britain to fulfill aspirations and meet expectations of intergenerational care. They migrated in increasing numbers after Independence to study and work because, as a former British colony and member of the Commonwealth, The Gambia has had close historical links to Britain. The Gambia is a fascinating case because although it is the smallest country in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a population of just under two million, incoming remittances as a percentage of gross domestic product are the highest in Africa (Kebbeh, 2013). Approximately 65,000 Gambians, 4% of the population, emigrated in 2010. However, the percentage of skilled Gambians leaving the country was the second highest in Africa (63 percent in 2000) (Ibid., 2013). Significantly, educated and skilled Gambians migrating to Europe have generally gone to Britain, while uneducated and unskilled Gambians from rural Gambia travel to Spain, the two most favourable destinations in Europe for Gambians (Bledsoe, 2007: 377-378). Through hard work, they hope to maximize the money they send home so as to better fulfill their obligations to others. Since many parents cannot afford to pay for childcare or sacrifice wages in order to look after their children, they frequently take children back to The Gambia at the age of six months to three years – either for a few years or indefinitely – to be cared for by grandparents and/or other extended family members (cf. Bledsoe and Sow, 2011). As a result of separation parents are forced to parent from a distance and engage in a transatlantic 'circulation of care' (Baldassar and Merla, 2013).

Literature on care and transnational families has partly focused on care chains, and the relations of care that mothers, who migrate to work as paid

domestic workers, put in to place as they are separated from their children when they migrate for work from the South to the North. As well as ensuring that their children are cared for at home, they care from a distance, engaging in 'intensive mothering' as they try to live up to ideal visions of motherhood (Carling, Menjivar and Schmalzbauer, 2012; Hondagnue-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parrenas 2005; Madianou and Miller, 2012: 4). This literature has been critiqued for, amongst other things, focusing largely on mother-child relations and ignoring fathers and the extended family in relations of care. Further, the care chains literature privileges the notion of the commodification of care as migrant mothers enter paid relations of care and support their families at home through remittances (Baldassar and Merla, 2013: 29). In order to move beyond a binary model, as reflected in the migrant / non-migrant chain of care, Baldassar and Merla (Ibid.:30-31) argue for a model that sees care as a circulating substance in which various forms of transnational care can take place at the same time. The notion of the circulation of care foregrounds the patchy nature of its dispersal, differences in the quality of care, and relations of power within and between families. Such care is '...governed by the moral codes of family and kinship ties, that is the moral economy' (Ibid.: 32). A focus on economy recognises the relations of (re) production, consumption and exchange within the household, kinship relations and wider economic spheres. The notion of the moral underscores the values, ethical imperatives and aesthetics that define a family's sense of what constitutes a desirable life. Within the context of transnational migration, many parents and carers see sound parenting, care and strong transnational ties as the foundation of a

desirable family life. Research in Mali and The Republic of Congo highlights the importance of care-giving to the maintenance of transnational relations (Whitehouse, 2009). In this sense, morally correct practices inform relations of care. Moreover, this relationship can be captured, documented and made visible through photography and visual media more generally.

Literature on domestic photography shows how photographic practice reflects a family's sense of intimacy, connection, and sense of self. Further, photographs generate sentimentality and document narratives about the family and relations within it (Barthes, 2000; Edwards, 2002). Central to this is the way in which the family uses photographs to affirm and reproduce class distinctions as well as gender and power relations (Barthes, 2000; Bourdieu, 1996). Similarly, in attempts to produce a sense of cohesion in an increasingly mobile world, photographic images - and their accompanying narratives - engage desirable visions of the family (Smart and Neale, 1999).

Mirroring the mobility of objects, ideas and people photographs circulate within particular transnational relations of care. As they circulate they accrue value within different cultural and discursive regimes in what Poole (1997:8) terms a visual economy, '...a comprehensive organization of people, ideas, and objects'. Through an analysis of photographs, portraits and cartes de visites from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s, Poole chronicles their movement between the Andes, Europe and North America, and their role in the emergence of racialised types and a modern science of race. The term economy highlights the mobility of visual images, from the site (and technologies) of production, to their exchange and reception. It underscores

the structured nature of social relations, informed by 'inequality and power' as well as 'shared meanings and community' (Poole, 1997: 9). Further, Poole's interest in the reception of photographs extends beyond their iconographic representation and is primarily concerned with the 'social uses' of photographs, that is how they accrue value. Poole (1997: 10) distinguishes between a photograph's use value, its indexicality, the ability of the photographic image to convey an accurate and truthful representation of its subject and its exchange value, which signals '...the value that images accrue through social processes of accumulation, possession, circulation and exchange'. Within the visual economy of the Andean image world photographs accrue exchange value in their representation of particular racialised types (Poole, 1997:10). For my purposes, the concept of visual economy sheds light on the global structural conditions of inequality that give rise to Gambian migration, as well as the inequalities and relations of power that emerge between those who are able to migrate and those who are, either willingly or not, left behind. At the same time, mirroring the transatlantic mobility of Gambian migrants as they travel between the U.K. and The Gambia, photographs - as part of an image world - provide insight into the 'shared meanings', moral economy and sense of home and community, that serve to connect Gambian parents with their children and carers in The Gambia.

In what follows, I examine the way in which family photographs are produced, exchanged, read and displayed in a transatlantic visual economy. With its emphasis on use and exchange value, the concept of visual economy

draws attention to the way photographs are valued differently both for their indexicality and for the way they amass value through 'accumulation, possession, circulation and exchange' (Poole, 1997). Yet, a focus on the exchange of family photographs within a transnational visual economy demands engagement with other forms of value. How does applying a moral economy lense help to develop an understanding of the visual economy and the value family photographs accrue within transnational kinship relations of care?

The material I present draws on fieldwork carried out from February 2012 to December 2013. The Gambia is very diverse and includes a number of different ethnic groups – Mandinka, Wolof, Jola, Fula, Aku (Creole), Serer, Serahuli, Caroninka, Manjago, Balanta, and a number of other minority groups – as well as other West African nationals, Lebanese, Chinese, Europeans and North Americans. Gambian society is hierarchical with stratification based on caste, class, descent, ethnic, national, religious and gender differences. Ninety percent of Gambians are Muslim, 10% Christian and 1% practice animist religions (Kea 2010). Having previously carried out research in Brikama, a largely Mandinka town in West Coast Division, I had built up close friendships and was known within the community. My Mandinka research assistant and friend put me in touch with her friends and contacts in the U.K. Consequently, all of my informants were Mandinka and Muslim, the majority ethnic group in The Gambia. Most Gambians in the U.K. live in east and southeast London and other urban areas in the U.K. (e.g. Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, and Birmingham). While carrying out



participant observation in flats and compounds in London and The Gambia, I would sit and look at photo albums and photos on display on cabinets and side tables in people's sitting rooms, getting a sense of common settings and poses. In London as well as in The Gambia, I carried out one-to-one interviews, group discussions and observations in family homes, and compounds. I interviewed seven Gambian migrants (four mothers and two fathers and one male child) in the U.K. and twelve adult carers, one man and eleven women and five children (both male and female) in the urban coastal areas and cities in West Coast division in The Gambia. In one case, having interviewed a mother in the U.K. I was able to interview her children and carer in The Gambia. In both a British and a Gambian sense the Gambian migrants can broadly be described as middle class, in terms of their levels of education, economic position and social status (cf. Spronk, 2014: 98). The carers were more mixed: most were educated and engaged in skilled work, whereas a few had limited education and worked part-time as traders and / or farmers.

### **Gambians on the move**

The Gambia is an agrarian neo-mercantilist state. Its burgeoning tourist trade, which started in the 1960s, has overtaken groundnut production as the main earner of foreign exchange. Bryceson (2002: 725) highlights the process of deagrarianization, or 'rural income diversification away from agricultural pursuits,' that has occurred in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of market liberalization, resulting in increasing economic inequalities. In addition, many rural migrants,

forced out of farming as a result of the Sahelian drought and decreasing prices for groundnut crops, migrate to the urban coastal areas in search of work in the tourist sector, with the majority of Gambians now residing in urban areas. Yet, the recent ebola crisis in other parts of West Africa and the erratic behaviour of Jammeh, the Gambian head of state, have had a detrimental effect on the tourist industry (Williams, 2015). As a result, Gambians are increasingly dependent on remittances from abroad (Kebbeh, 2013). At the same time, given high rates of unemployment and a risky political climate many migrate to neighbouring West African countries, Europe and elsewhere, in search of work. As parents aspire to send their children abroad youth's imagined futures are increasingly located in Europe and the United States. Both serve as speculative spaces on which to map precarious futures. In attempts to combat high rates of emigration, the government's 'Back to the Land Campaign' and 'Operation feed the nation' programmes mimic similar West African initiatives that promote agrarian livelihoods (Gaibazzi, 2013:260) and food self sufficiency. Yet, as long as Gambian youth equate farming with tradition and professional 'white collar' work with being global and modern, such initiatives will have limited impact.

Migrants to the U.K. tend to be relatively well off because the costs of the journey are high (De Haas, 2008: 1308). Nonetheless, strict visa regulations, in which some are granted visas and others not, serve to further underscore the relations of inequality that migration to Europe and North America either reinforce or give rise to. In many cases Gambians, most commonly youth, who aspire to migrate seek out the financial and / or documentary support of kinsfolk and friends residing abroad. In so doing they affirm social relations and networks

rooted in shared meanings and life worlds. However, as Gaibizzi (2014:40) maintains, such relations often need to be cultivated and worked on, thereby positioning would be migrants as compliant and relatively powerless vis a vis kinsfolk and friends who reside abroad. Many would be migrants, who wait for years in a liminal state of expectation, experience feelings of powerlessness, (Crapanzano, 1986) anger and frustration. It is common to see groups of men sitting for hours in all male social spaces under the *bantaba*, an area under the Bentennie tree where groups of men sit and drink *attaya* (green tea). Similarly, Gambians who reside in Britain on temporary visas are subjected to strict immigration laws and changing visa regulations, restricting their ability to travel freely (Bledsoe and Sow, 2011). They too are positioned in a state of precarity as they wait for permanent residence status.

Gambians travel as semi-skilled and skilled labour migrants to the U.K. - particularly doctors and nurses - students, and as refugees and undocumented migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2000: 133). Although some Gambian migrants will continue to work in the same professions once in Britain, many qualified and educated Gambians are forced into low paid and unskilled work, such as care work, paid domestic work, cleaning, hairdressing, shop work and manual labor. In some cases they work multiple jobs in order to meet the high cost of living and to send money home to help to support family in The Gambia. As well as avoiding the high costs of childcare, many parents send their children back to The Gambia because of their strong feelings about the interfering role of the British state in influencing child rearing practices and domestic relations. Many Gambian migrants maintain that they are not able to

discipline their children as they would ideally like to. Highlighting the significance of Mandinka culture, Islam and personhood, they were keen to have their children socialized in The Gambia and, in arranging to have their children sent back, would make use of local fostering arrangements that are central to West African practices of childcare. In this sense, as well as ensuring that their children are socialized as Gambians, they invest in their families, networks and identities as Gambians.

### **Photographs, (re)production and the practice of return**

There are a range of practices, such as fosterage, wardship, and apprenticeship – in which children are taken out of the care of their parents – found throughout West Africa (Goody, 1978: 227). The practice of fostering – in which children are sent to live with relatives or friends to allow them to attend school, as an additional source of labour, to give them more children, and to solidify relations -is common across all social classes and among different ethnic groups throughout West Africa (Bledsoe and Sow, 2011: 748; Goody, 1982). Within this context raising and socializing children is seen as a collective responsibility. Significantly, fosterage is about establishing relations of patronage between adults within a wider kin network, thereby affirming particular sets of kinship relations (Bledsoe, 1990). In order to affirm social relations and one's social status people invest in people and profit from the claims to which such investment gives rise (Guyer, 1993). As an ethical imperative and a social mechanism that generates connections within and between families fostering is

central to the moral economy. In this sense, the West African practice of fostering readily supports transnational care giving arrangements.

The decision to send children to The Gambia requires a transnational collective endeavour - involving parents and potential carers – to ensure that parents have time to work and study, and that children are socialised as Gambians. Expectations of appropriate care and the production of particular types of subjects, are invariably informed by ideas of what constitutes a 'good child' and the support and care needed to produce one, as Mariamma's case illustrates.

Mariamma, a well educated woman in her late 50s who trained as a nurse in Britain, lives in a prosperous, quiet and leafy compound in Bakau, a coastal town 20 minutes away from the capital, Banjul. She has looked after her four-year-old granddaughter for the last year and a half while her daughter was studying and is now working as a nurse in the U.K. She sends Bintou to nursery everyday to ensure that she socialises with other children because there are no other children living in the compound.

As well as being disciplined into performing particular domestic tasks, which are invariably gendered, children are expected to become accustomed (*dali*) to the Mandinka way (*silo*). The latter involved: acquiring good manners, obedience, respect and an enduring sense of Gambian sociality; learning Mandinka; studying the Koran and attending Koranic school; discipline through prayer in Arabic; and academic achievement. Yet, this demands good parenting and care, which, according to Mariamma, entails:

...feeding, clothing, educating, caring, loving, and guiding the child on the right path. I sincerely believe that my child should be able to have as much as he/she can. Not go around looking for it outside. I would hate that...going out and begging or borrowing. I would work very hard to make sure that whatever he or she needs I would provide it. Plus their education is very important. Good behaviour and good attitude.

As well as providing evidence of familial intimacy and the reproduction of the family unit, photographs serve as evidence of the correctness of socialising practices, that children are well cared for by their carers and socialised into particular types of behaviour. In this sense, photographs provide insight into broader values and beliefs concerning childcare and socialization (cf. Edwards, 2012: 231). These moralities of appropriate child behaviour and caring practices are endorsed and depicted in the staged and formal photographic portraits that typify Gambian domestic photography. Significantly, they have their roots in European and African studio portrait photography of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

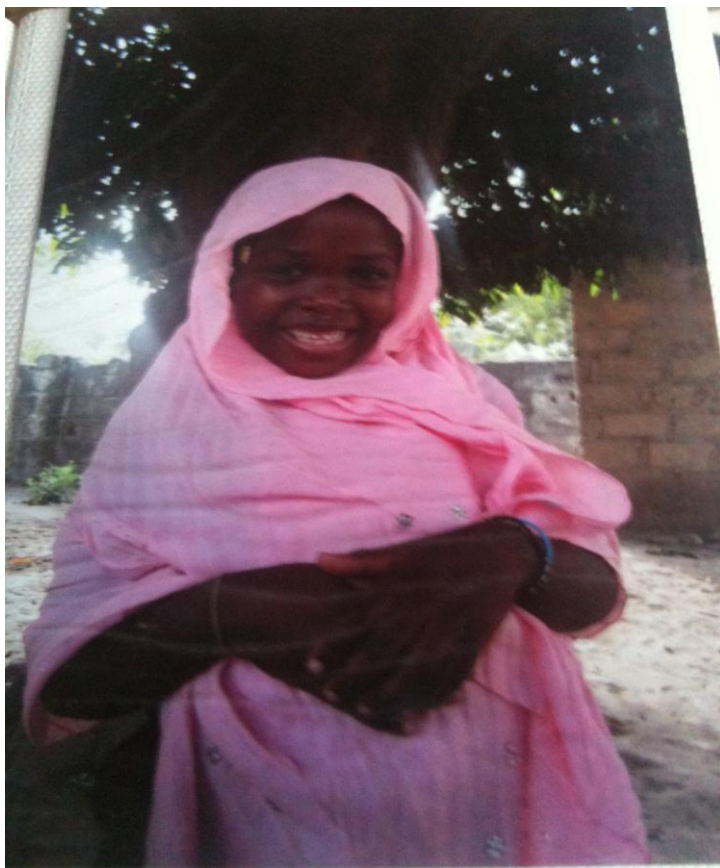
The development of portrait photography from the 1830s in Europe signified a technological revolution in which images were mechanically reproduced for the first time, thereby paving the way for their proliferation and dissemination (Rose, 2010: 3). With the establishment of the Kodak camera in 1888 we see the democratisation and domestication of photography in Europe, in which the medium was liberated from its 'artistic history' and its more formal expression found in portrait photography. From this period photography entered

the home and became the chief means by which family life and relations were documented and represented (Hirsch, 1999, xvii). By contrast, portrait studio photography continued to prevail in West Africa. From the 1850s West African photographers, as cosmopolitans, travelled up and down the Atlantic coast taking portraits before setting up studios in main coastal cities (Schneider, 2014: 323). High levels of mobility, a growing elite mercantile class as well as waged migrant labourers, resulted in a demand for studio photography (Haney, 2012:129).

The twinned and intertwined movements of people and of photos are artifacts of the modern era in West Africa. In this flux the commission of a portrait was a gesture to commit the action of movement for posterity. Portraits and cartes de visite became a kind of currency and memento, exchanged all along the coast (Haney, 2014: 369).

The carte de visite, a small photo card patented in France in 1854 by Andre Disderi, spread in popularity throughout West and Central Africa in the 1850s (Schneider, 2014: 324-325). As well as a means to affirm status, photographs, particularly the cartes de visite, were attributed with increasing significance as they represented enhanced mobility, changing identities and the possibilities and achievements that migration afforded (Haney, 2014:368). Similarly, exchanged photographs were used to affirm existing relationships as well as build and consolidate new ones with family, friends and business associates (Schneider, 2014:323). Contemporary practices of taking and exchanging photographs have clear links with the past: they reflect enhanced mobility, existing relationships, changing statuses, and novel identities. Significantly, contemporary domestic

photography closely mirrors portrait studio photography in terms of the formal nature of the portraits, the setting and the sense of occasion that the act of taking photographs engenders. In many of the photographs Mariamma, and other informants shared with me children were frequently pictured in formal portraits, alongside other family members, seated on sofas in the front parlour or in front of the compound in full sartorial splendour (Figure 1). Indeed, people dress up and do their hair in preparation for photographic portraits.



**Figure 1.** This photograph was sent to the girl's parents in the U.K. She was being cared for by her grandmother in The Gambia.



The setting for photographic portraits is equally important. Photographs are typically taken in front parlour rooms and in the compound courtyard. The extended family compound forms the basis of the social structure of a village or a town. Typically, a compound has one main house, consisting of two rooms, a parlour and a bedroom, where the senior male lives, and several smaller houses for his wives, sons, and their families. Each wife lives in a separate house with her children. Poorer compounds may only have one or two buildings in which several members of a family may sleep together in one room. Parlours, as showcases for the affluent, middle classes, and aspiring middle classes are continuously dressed up, cleaned daily and, even in more sparsely decorated parlours, beautifully maintained, ready to host guests and act as a backdrop for photographic portraits (Figure 2).

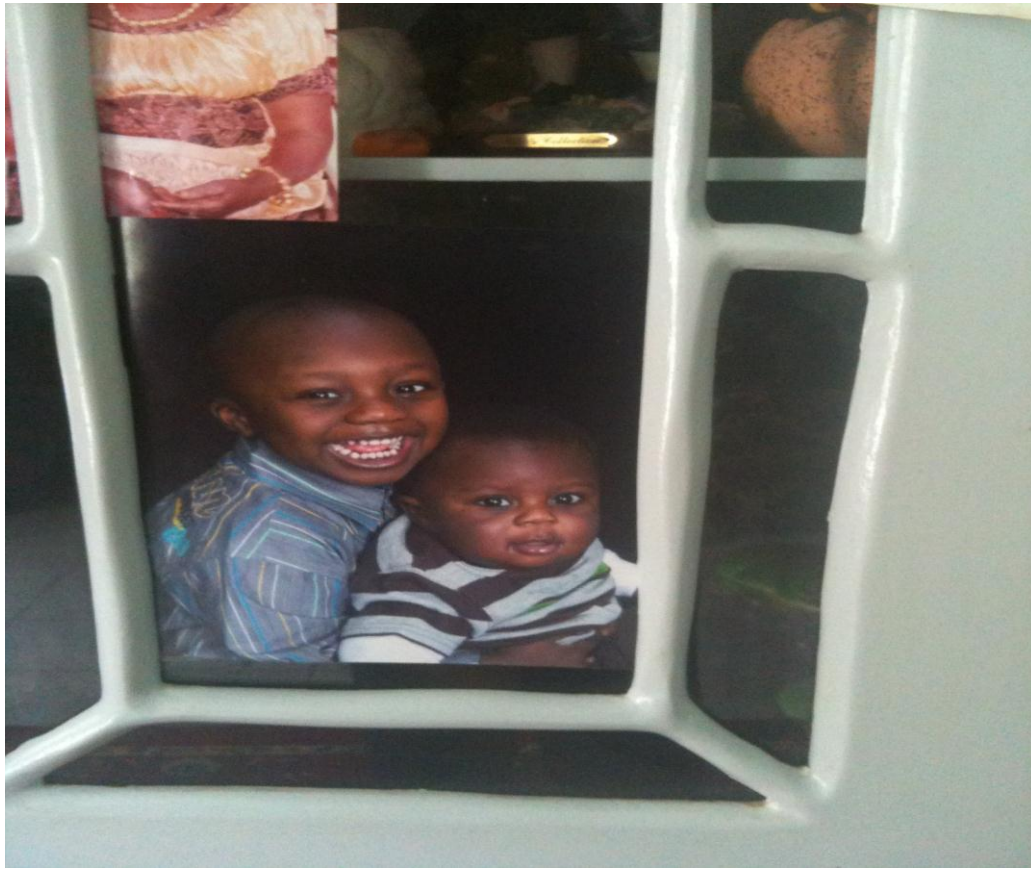


**Figure 2.** A spacious and elegant Gambian parlour.

The well-furnished and 'elegant' parlour is a postcolonial phenomenon, reflecting the spirit, aesthetics and materiality of national development, modernization and citizenship making – as photographs were taken of Gambian citizens for the national census - that accompanied Gambian Independence in 1965 (Buckley, 2006: 64). Following Meyer, aesthetics as political instruments of power (2010: 755) are, within this context, central to the evocation of progress and modernity. In contemporary Gambian studio photographic practice the parlour is seen as a flexible space. Studio photographers either recreate a parlour in the studio - complete with sofa, armchairs, tall cabinets with shelves, coffee tables, television (shrouded in a delicate lace cloth), curtains, a radio and lacework neatly placed on the back of chairs and the sofa - or the photographer visits the client in his / her compound (Buckley, 2006:61).

Buckley (Ibid., 62) documents the way in which studio photographers' clients describe the experience of having their photo taken in a parlour as feeling cherished. 'Cherished and portrayed people...engage a relationship of intimacy and trust with their material environment'. Similarly, it is important to Gambian parents that photographs of their children convey the sense that their children feel at home in their new environment and are treasured and loved, both as photographic referents and by the extended family. As well as reassuring parents that their children are being properly cared for and supported, this sense of being wanted and loved - one that should ideally be experienced by the child and conveyed through the photographic image -

helps to generate intimacy between the photographer, the child being photographed (the referent) and the parent (the viewer) (Figure 3). The careful staging of formal photographic portraits allows carers to signal and produce particular caring practices, as well as to celebrate these practices (Goffman 1990:45). Following Goffman (1959) this collective performance, which is for public consumption, usually involves a particular setting and decor, that of the parlour (the front stage / public) or the compound courtyard. Here, in attempts to fulfill an ethical imperative, or become ethical, (Faubion, 2011) carers and children occupy particular subject positions. They do so by fulfilling obligations in deliberate and specific ways, working on and cultivating certain types of behaviour (Buckley, 2006: 45-46), thereby creating a particular impression of reality (Goffman, 1959). In this sense, they mythologize sets of highly complex relationships, reducing them to staged and formulaic entities (cf. Anderman, 2009: 335). This partly explains Gambians' attachments to the limited range of poses one finds in formal photographic portraits. Here, within a transatlantic visual economy, photographs accrue value in their representation of particular caring practices, which are, in turn, informed by the moral economy and a particular shared aesthetic. They are judged according to the representation and performance of particular standards of care. Value is objectified and realised through the iconographic representation of particular caring practices (cf. Miller 2005). I suggest that photographs are also valued because parents and carers are able to use them to vindicate decisions to send children to The Gambia through transatlantic fostering arrangements.



**Figure 3.** This photograph on display in a Gambian parlour was sent to the parents in the U.K.

In the following discussion Awa conveys the importance of feeling that her son was wanted and well cared for while he was living in The Gambia. Muhammed eventually returned to Britain to attend school. Awa came to the U.K. in 1997, after marrying her cousin, Mustapha, an accountancy lecturer in London. She now works evening shifts as a care worker at a nursing home for two or three nights a week in Woolwich where she lives in a second floor flat in a 1960s low rise council block with her husband and three children: Muhammed, aged thirteen, Abdoullah, aged eight and Mariamma, aged four.

A: The nursery provision is really expensive. For Muhammed that's the reason why I took him (back to The Gambia). So, that I could study because we lived in a shared accommodation as well. We were not in a position to look after him properly. Mustapha was studying and I wanted to study as well.

P: How do you think he benefited from being there?

A: Discipline wise. He listens to me more, then this one. (She points to Abdullah). He knows the language as well. He's aware of the love surrounding him because he was brought up by the grandparents and everybody loves him and cares for him. The attention. I think he enjoyed that. Also, he's more sociable than the others. You can see the difference. When we went for holiday he was excited, like me. He was happy. It's benefited him by giving him a good foundation in terms of behavior.

Muhammed was wanted and loved by everyone, and felt at home in The Gambia, something that was a source of comfort to Awa and Mustapha while separated from him. Just as carers and children occupy particular subject positions in the staging of photographs, so too parents see and interpret the photographs from certain subject positions, that of dutiful parents who ensure that Muhammed is loved by the extended family and at ease with life in The Gambia. She initially lived in Northwest London when she came to London and found it very challenging and lonely living with her husband but no extended family. Gambians live in large extended patrilineal, patrilocal and polygamous family compounds

(Kea 2004). Given the residential make-up of compounds, there are usually a number of different carers who can look after children.

A: Being alone in a closed environment I was so lonely. It was before skype and the phone was expensive. I had photographs of my family and friends, which helped me. When I first went back to The Gambia after three years I talked so much. I'm a quiet person. I was so excited. I was so happy to be back in my home environment. I missed the help and going and visiting anyone, anytime in their compounds without even informing them.

Awa conveys the heartfelt and emotional connection she has to The Gambia and her utter pleasure and excitement during her first visit home. Similarly, as photographs work through sentimentality (Barthes, 2000), they conjure up feelings of nostalgia for home – smells, sounds, tastes and textures – as well as parents' own experiences of childhood and idealised visions of the past. This nostalgic connection to The Gambia of their youth, as well as their recent past, further vindicates parents' decisions to send their children to The Gambia.

### **Receiving and exchanging Photographs**

Photographs in Gambian homes are displayed on tall, elaborate, and intricately carved cabinets with several drawers and open shelves, taking pride of place in the front parlour, a space that, as we have seen, is privileged in the photographic narrative (Figures 4).



**Figure 4.** Photographs displayed on Gambian shelving in front parlour.

The placing and display of photographs often mirrors the social relations of those depicted in the images (Rose, 2003). Such work involves a code of morally correct practices around the treatment and display of photographs and other treasured ornaments (Figure 5).





**Figure 5.** Photographs, along with other treasured ornaments, on display on a parlour cabinet.

They may also be placed in old family photo albums, shelved on cabinets or stacked on coffee tables. As well as continuing with such patterns of display, Gambian migrants in the UK mount framed photos on walls, highlighting the absence of children and other kinfolk. Yet, as in Awa's case, photographic images, in their use value, re-inscribe a presence and the sense of a person, thereby serving to connect the viewer with the referent (Benjamin, 1979: 243).

A: In the end it was very difficult. I used to call a lot. Because he couldn't talk I was worrying all the time – what was happening to him and what was he eating. I would be watching on the street looking at other people's children. You know it was



really hard but they would send me pictures of him when he was walking, sitting. (She laughs).

P: And did you send photos there or was he too little?

A: Yes, we sent pictures as well. We visited him twice for two weeks and then three weeks. Not much.

During the interview, Awa pointed to a small side table with two framed photographs of Muhammed as a toddler in The Gambia. Her mother sent photographs documenting the various stages of his development. Awa would, in turn, send photographs of Muhammed's younger brother, herself and his father to The Gambia. Photographs of Muhammed on his own, with other family members and attending social functions helped to allay Awa's feelings of loss, and the sense that she was missing out on his childhood. Paradoxically, the sense of loss, absence and distance from home, family and community is central to the creation of value. Consequently, as photographs circulate they inspire a range of emotions. Displayed on shelves, cabinets and tables, and carried in purses, they are shared with friends and relatives. The process of sharing and display, a type of performance in itself, provides 'social visibility' (Berg 2015: 142) and affirmation of parent, child and carer relations as well as evidence from which to chronicle and document changes in the child's development. Photographs, thereby, accrue use and exchange value as they represent a particular set of fostering arrangements, a key

feature of a West African moral economy, as well as convey the rich and extensive relations that their production and circulation nurtures and sustains.

With the introduction of digital photographs we witness a move away from the tactility of the analogue photograph and the proliferation of images as they appear on handsets and on computer screens, giving rise to different forms of sociality, as well as practices of exchange. Indeed, the ubiquity of mobile phones and laptop computers facilitate the use of free web-based, real-time video telephone systems, such as Viber and Skype. Such instantaneous communication means people can be in touch with each other more frequently and instantaneously, often helping to alleviate loneliness and homesickness. Further, the proliferation and accumulation of digital photographs (Van House, 2011: 127) allows Awa and other informants in the U.K. to view images of family occasions, Islamic holidays, birthday parties and photographic portraits in the front parlour virtually instantaneously. As mobile phones are always to hand, digital images are circulated as a matter of course. For instance, when interviewing one of my informant's in a café near Tower Bridge in London, she picked up her mobile phone and showed me a range of images of her daughters at an Eid celebration, providing narrative commentary on each image. It is unlikely that she would have had as many analogue photos with her to show me (cf. Ibid., 2011: 128). The instantaneous exchange of photographs serves to dispel distance and time, whilst creating a sense of co-temporality. We have to, therefore, reflect on the kinds of value that are produced in different kinds of movement or circulation (Rose, 2010: 68). With digital images that are sent

instantaneously the sense of the referent's presence may be intensified because of the speed with which the image is sent. Further, the speed with which photographs can be sent fulfills the ethical imperative to send parents photographs of their children shortly after taking the photograph. In this sense they accrue exchange value. Yet, this exchange is about more than the circulation, possession and accumulation of photographs but too about the sense of obligation and duty that compels carers to send photos of the children in their care. Parents recognize that carers, partly out of a sense of obligation, send them photographs of their children. Consequently, it is in the recognition of the fulfillment of this duty that photographs accrue value.

### **Photographs, consumption and imagined futures**

As we have seen formal portrait photographs of well dressed Gambian children in The Gambia reflect a material well-being and opulence (in terms of clothing, parlour decorations, furniture, technology, housing, transport etc.) accorded only to prosperous Gambians, those who receive remittances and Gambian migrants residing in wealthier parts of the world, as the following case suggests:

Genoba, a middle-aged Mandinka woman of 35, who lives in her large compound in Brikama, has been looking after her eight-year-old niece Ida since she was one. She offered to look after Ida because of the way Ida's mother struggled to combine work and care for Ida in the U.K. (According to Genoba Ida's mother 'could not afford hefty childcare costs in London and did

not trust the child minders'). Genoba claims she was 'so happy' when Ida's mother brought Ida to The Gambia; she has 'adopted her as her own'. This is particularly poignant because Genoba does not have any of her own children. In a context where having children is central to what it means to be a woman, Genoba is happy to assume the role of primary carer of her niece. Ida's mother travelled to The Gambia with Ida but has not been back since. However, Ida has travelled to the U.K. twice, when she was five and seven. Genoba insists that Ida is keen to return to The Gambia when she goes on holiday to visit her parents, claiming, 'that place (the U.K.) is too quiet.'

As I sat in the front parlour talking with Genoba, Ida showed me photographs of her parents and baby brother in the U.K. She then ran into the back bedroom to retrieve a newly acquired laptop computer, brought from the U.K. by a friend of her parents so that they could skype regularly. Genoba then proceeded to explain that when Ida skypes with her mother, either on the computer or mobile phone, she makes requests for material items – clothes, bags, furniture, toys, etc. 'I want this head tie, clothes, shoes.' Here, material consumption and (re) distribution affirms the trappings of middle class identity and serves to unite family - Ida and her parents, as well as carers to their relatives living abroad. Providing for one's children is central to care, the socialization of children and the production of particular types of subjects. Similarly, migrants provide for their immediate and extended family through the remittance economy. Throughout West Coast Division and the coastal communities of The Gambia the compounds of those with family members residing abroad had: new roofs and furniture

(figure 6); tiled and / or linoleum compound floors (figure 7); additional rooms that had been added on to the main house; laptops, televisions, stereos, and phones; newly built concrete walls surrounding the compound; and cars and / or min-vans, as a testament to the new found prosperity of kinfolk living abroad.



**Figure 6.** Newly purchased bed in a Gambian compound.



**Figure 7.** Newly tiled area in front of a compound.

Many of their inhabitants wore beautifully tailored clothing, new watches and jewelry. Their material trappings, aesthetic qualities and the nature and scale of consumption - highlighting the apparently global and modern nature of their lives - serves to distinguish Gambians who benefit from the wealth of their relatives abroad and those who do not. Similarly, migrants residing abroad have bought land on which to build homes for their future return, and generated a regional building boom (cf. Sinatti, 2008: 66), whilst transforming the Gambian coastal landscape. Indeed, this display of new found wealth in rural communities in The Gambia encourages young men to risk their lives by taking 'the back way', the dangerous journey across the Sahara and the Mediterranean to Europe. Photographs of this new found

wealth, taken by carers and either sent to parents or displayed on parlour cabinets and shelves in Gambian homes, chronicle change and provide evidence of parents' aspirations, successes and the trappings of the imagined futures to which they aspire. They evidence particular manners, characteristics and attributes that affirm middle class and affluent identities. Photographs taken at the airport or, more unusually, on airplanes capture the power and privilege that mobility affords. Privilege may be conveyed through the setting and staging of the photograph's subject and content, for example in dressed up parlours, at airports or in airplanes (Figure 8), as well as through associated activities. For instance, visits to the airport to meet returning family, friends and lovers become an occasion in themselves as people dress up and spend hours at the airport beforehand.





**Figure 8.** Photograph of a young Gambian girl in the first class section of an airplane.



Further, they highlight the structural inequalities between those who migrate, or stay at home and benefit from migrants' remittances, and those who do not. Similarly, the absence of photographs and / or remittances from Gambians residing in the U.K. to kinfolk in The Gambia draws attention to the former's plight - many of who are irregular and live on the margins of the British economy - and the economic pressures that impinge on the fulfilment and maintenance of these relations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The transatlantic visual economy helps to connect Gambian migrant parents, their children and carers. However, it also contributes to the reproduction of national and global inequalities, because it fuels and nourishes the desire of many Gambians to migrate and fulfil aspirations. I want to conclude by reflecting on how a focus on the moral economy can extend our understanding of the visual economy and the various forms of value that photographic images accrue within transnational kinship relations of care. As we have seen photographs illustrate the fulfillment of appropriate child behaviour, socialisation and the enactment of moral codes of care, thereby vindicating parents' decisions to send children to The Gambia. Yet, photographs are staged and performed as carers and children fulfil certain subject positions. In their staging, they provide the requisite evidence that carers are caring for children. Within the visual economy of Gambian transnational kinship relations photographs accrue use and exchange value in

their representation of particular types of caring practices. They make the moral economy real and visible. Yet, as family photographs they also accrue other types of value. For instance, in the form of the knowledge that is generated about particular sets of caring relations, as well as in the regulation and control of these relations. They provide insight into the broader beliefs concerning childcare and socialization, which are a key feature of the moral economy of care. In short, they affirm the moral economy and are, in turn, central to it, because an ethical imperative drives practices of exchange, production and the display of family photographs. However, this care is partly dependent on financial remittances from parents living abroad. Indeed, parents feel morally obliged to increase remittances if they choose to send their children home for care; at the same time parents expect carers to socialise, love and care for their children as they themselves would. In this sense, the concept of moral economy, reflects the interplay between moral codes of care and socialisation, and the economics of financial remittances. These are interconnected and form part of an ethics of care. The concept of the moral economy supports a hermeneutics of Gambian family photographic practice and develops our understanding of the visual economy of transnational kinship relations in a number of ways: it draws attention to the way in which the value attributed to a photograph is rooted in *shared* moral and cultural codes of care within transnational relations of inequality and power; it helps us to interpret Gambian's responses to and treatment of family photographs, as well as the cultural significance of visibility more broadly; and it highlights the importance attributed to portrait photography

and the staging, setting and aesthetics of photographic content within a Gambian imaginary.

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